

Editorial: Why Churches Fail

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*Except the Lord do build the house
The builders lose their pain:
Except the Lord the city keep,
The watchmen watch in vain (Ps. 127:1).*

Introduction

This article sprang out of recent developments in the Free Church of Scotland. While sympathising with the necessary stand the Continuing Church has taken I am not sanguine as to the long term outcome. It may be useful to explain why. This accounts for the Scottish illustrations. But the issues are the same in every church or denomination

Judgment

It is my opinion that our nation is not only ripe for judgment but is now experiencing it: “*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient*” (Rom. 1:28). Sodomy is not only practised but flaunted in our face and a veritable holocaust has descended upon the unborn children in the clinics and hospitals of our land. Churches, including Reformed ones, are also under judgment. We may not “*despise the day of small things*” and we gladly recognize that it is: “*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.*” But God, in large measure appears to have withdrawn His Spirit and without Him we are helpless. Ultimately it is the Lord who builds the house—or who takes away the candlestick. A recent Scottish Church Census showed that each week around 300 people have stopped attending services in the last eight years, down from 690,000 in 1994 to 570,000 in 2002. I have not seen figures for Wales, where I live, but the melancholy picture of locked church buildings or conversions of church buildings into homes or businesses tell a similar tale. This is not, of course, the whole story. The evangelical press brings regular details of new churches springing into life and, of course, there is large church growth overseas. But the general position is recognisable so it may be useful to explore some reasons why churches fail.

Wrong Reasons

1. We may feel we fail because we have been insufficiently active in evangelism, outreach or youth work, though experience suggests that whether we try hard or do little the outcome is much the same—too often little or nothing. The amusement driven, comfortable, immoral life will not readily yield its victims to the gospel call. 2. Looking round at an ageing congregation, we may see the problem as that our children have grown up, perhaps gone on to university and ultimately take jobs and marry and raise families in some big city. But this is another false reason—if properly raised what is a loss to our local church will be a gain to some other. 3. Sometimes numbers increase. A faithful preacher labours long and diligently and sheep looking to be fed come in from other congregations. But again this is simply a transfer. And still the grim reaper lays his hand on each and every congregation and numbers inevitably decline. Very properly we reject those unbiblical developments which have appeared to give a spurious but temporary appearance of life to some congregations. But why are we failing? What is the reason?

The Real Reason

Is there a clue in the picture of the olive tree in Romans 11? After Pentecost many Jews were converted and became part of the Christian church—but the bulk did not. And Gentile branches were grafted in. But *“do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.”* Round the olive tree lie the discarded branches of the Jewish church, and now heaped on top of them the Gentile branches which God has cut off! Their parents and grandparents were faithful members of the church. Their ministers brought the Word of Life faithfully to them week by week. The praises of God ascended to Him Sabbath by Sabbath, but now there remains but a folk memory of the past. They may appear “to be hatched, matched and dispatched” but there is no life.

It is important to realise the details of the picture. The root is Christ. The stem represents the Jewish church. The branches are not individuals—those united to Christ are in Him forever—but generations. It is here we have failed! Are we not overlooking certain biblical directives which should be governing our lives?

I believe we are and at the risk of causing some offence I would like to develop the matter.¹

Demography

Take first the question of **Marriage**. In the biblical account of the creation we read: “*And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*” The normal and biblical position is that we should marry when we come to maturity. Is this something we have failed to teach in our preaching? Each generation has its list of the unmarried but it is my impression that we have an unusually high proportion of bachelors in Reformed churches! Again one meets from time to time godly women who would make excellent mothers in Israel, but are denied the normal pattern of home and family as a result.²

Children

Second the usual and proper outcome of marriage is children. “*And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth ...*” The Psalm we quoted from at the head of this article continues: “*Lo, children are a heritage of the LORD; And the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows in the hand of a mighty man, So are the children of youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.*” And in the next Psalm: “*Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine, In the innermost parts of thy house; Thy children like olive plants, Round about thy table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD.*” I know that not all couples can have children, but have we been brainwashed by the view of an over-populated world and the belief that one or two children with a maximum of three is an appropriate number? That these are not just OT ideas is brought out by the apostle when he writes: “*but she shall be saved through her child-bearing, if they continue in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety, and, later, I desire therefore that the younger widows marry, bear children, rule the household and that they may train the young women to love their husbands, to love*

¹We are reminded in Scripture by our Lord that one is our Master, even the Christ and we all are brethren; and by Paul, Who are you to judge another servant? Each of us shall give account of himself to God. I cannot know the circumstances of my readers—nor do I judge their personal decisions—I am simply trying to look at the present facts and develop principles from them.

²Every individual case is different—and I intend no personal judgment—but it does occur to me that the very paucity and often smallness of Reformed churches in the UK is probably a contributing factor to the difficulty of finding suitable husbands or wives.

their children, to be sober-minded, chaste, workers at home ... "Again, I ask are we allowing the world to write the agenda or is a desire to pursue a career, or to earn money so that we may enjoy a higher standard of living, to come above the high calling of rearing the next generation?

We are in fact faced with a demographic crisis in both church and state in the West. "Of Europe's forty seven nations, only one, Muslim Albania, was, by 2000, maintaining a birthrate sufficient to keep it alive indefinitely. Europe had begun to die." "The average fertility of a European woman has fallen to 1.4 children, with 2.1 needed just to replace the existing population." By the end of this century English people will be a minority in their homeland.³

Education

God makes promises to us and our offspring and so we rightly bring them to baptism and thus membership in the visible church. But what about their spiritual education? Are two sermons on a Lord's Day, only one of which they will for some years attend, and a Sunday School class or young people's fellowship enough? I think not! Hopefully there will be family worship but they need to be instructed in the Old Testament and New Testament; Church History and the Catechisms; Creeds and Confessions. We have excellent materials in the Westminster Standards, but it is my impression that they are being inadequately used. We do not expect arithmetic or reading or writing or any other school subject to be taught in an unstructured way! Why on earth do we suppose it is appropriate for the faith? There is no point in choosing elders who are apt to teach if they do not do it! The church needs a well thought out programme involving them and the minister! Here is part of an e-mail from a minister in a Reformed denomination: "I have three weekly Bible studies, six catechism classes, and two worship services to prepare for every week in addition to other meetings and work. We have now started our annual family visitation ..."

But we need also to think about **Schooling**. A century and a half ago the master and the minister worked in conjunction. But that is no longer so. The bulk of the school population and most of the teachers in the state schools are now antagonistic to the faith and our children will also be put under considerable peer pressure to conform to the ways of the world: lying, swearing, drug taking and fornication. Is this the climate in which we wish them to be raised? I

³Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West*, p. 12.

think not! Home schooling may be part of the answer, but if we wish to save the next generation for Christ then Christian schools are a necessity. That will involve time and trouble and money.

Would such a programme work? In 1925 three churches left the Christian Reformed Church in a dispute over common grace and formed what subsequently became the Protestant Reformed Churches of America. Fifty years ago, in 1953 they had grown to 24 churches, 28 ministers, some 1400 families and more than 6000 members. Then a split occurred over the doctrine of the covenant. They ended the year with 16 churches, 14 ministers, 560 families and slightly less than 2400 members. After they had picked themselves up they continued just such a program: marrying, bearing large families, family prayers, regular preaching at least twice a week, catechism and instruction classes for the young up to eighteen, Christian schools etc. And the results this year fifty years later in 2003? There are now 27 churches; 33 full-time ministers; more than 1700 families and nearly 7000 members. Practically this is rather charmingly illustrated by three notices of 50th Wedding Anniversaries, all from the year of the schism, in the pages of the *Standard Bearer*. In the first there are eight children, seven married, with 28 grandchildren. In the second there are seven children, all of whom have married; 46 grandchildren and one great-grandchild and the third couple have six children, all married, 9 grandchildren and 6 great grand-children.

Conclusion

Is the Free Church of Scotland doomed? On the face of it: probably! And the same goes for the Free Presbyterians, the APCs and I suspect most of the independent churches in England and Wales and the Presbyterians of Ireland. Where are the biblical churches of Asia Minor? Or the once flourishing churches of North Africa? God and time move on! The cry is for revival! Well, may He grant it: but it is His work, not ours. But there are things which we can do—and which are within our power—some of which I have outlined above. Will we bestir ourselves to do them? Or will we continue to let the world write the agenda and embrace a graceful and pietistic decline?⁴

⁴But experience teaches that the one certainty about our predictions is that they will be wrong! Christ is King of the nations. He has told us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come." There are large and gracious predictions in the Word; though I must confess I have no idea how these predictions will be fulfilled.